# Cropsey Played an Important Role in the World War II Effort

By: Dale C. Maley
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For the United States, World War II started in 1941 with the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. This war ended just under four years later when Japan surrendered to the United States.

Many historians contend the primary reason the United States won this war was the nation's ability to produce more goods than any nation in history. These goods included military equipment for the United States and its allied countries. These goods also included all the agricultural products produced by American farmers. During the war, American farmers grew enough food to feed the United States and many allied populations.

The Gibson City Canning Factory dates back to at least 1903. In that year, that factory installed a new 100 horse-power engine to replace a thirty-horse-power engine. This new engine operated a dynamo that provided electricity for the plant. In 1907, a major remodel of the factory was done. The length of the husking sheds was increased by seventy-five feet. New dumps were constructed to provide for unloading the sweet corn brought in by farmers. The new dumps eliminated the farmers from scooping the sweet corn from their wagons to the factory.

This factory canned hominy in the early nineteen hundreds. It also canned sweet corn, dried beans, and green peas. During the Great Depression in the 1930s, the factory canned beef for the government.

In 1936, the factory decided to run an experiment and develop a system for growing and canning peas. One hundred acres of peas were planted on farms near Gibson City. The peas were planted on twenty plots of just five acres each. Once the harvest season started, the factory operated day and night until the harvest was over.

This experiment was a success, so in 1937, the pea farm acreage was increased from 100 to 800 acres. Each plot was on ten acres of land. The canning factory hired nineteen people to be hullers to work at strategic locations to separate the peas from the vines. In addition to the 800 acres of peas canned that year, 5,000 acres of sweet corn were also canned. This second year of canning peas was a success, and the factory began canning peas each year after this experiment.

Farmers learned that growing peas was much more labor-intensive than growing soybeans. Once the peas reached the harvest stage, farmers cut the vines with horse-drawn mowers. The vines had to be manually raked into rows, so the subsequent horse-drawn hayrack would not crush them. Farm laborers had to manually use pitchforks to move the vines from the rows on the ground onto a hay wagon. The hay wagon would

take them to a central area where hullers separated the peas from the vines. The peas were then canned in the factory.

Farmers were exempt from being drafted into World War II. Hired farm laborers either enlisted or were drafted into the military. Those few non-farmers who were not serving in the military migrated to the high-paying jobs in war factories in Illinois. As a result, labor for farm work was very scarce. Growing peas was not as profitable as growing soybeans unless the government offered a higher price for the peas.

For the 1942 growing season, the government decided that the Gibson City canning factory should double its average pea production from 750 acres to 1,500 acres. The government instructed the plant to stop producing its winter packaging of pork and beans. The stoppage of pork and beans packaging would conserve the limited supplies of tin cans for the more essential and high vitamin pea crop.

The canning factory purchased several new viner machines, power units, field boxes, and additional factory equipment to handle the enlarged pea acreage. To entice farmers to sign up and grow peas, the government increased the price from $49 to $70 per acre.

To help alleviate the farmer's concerns about labor shortages, a well-coordinated farm labor placement program was announced by the state director of agriculture. Farm bureaus, the extension service, and county war boards all cooperated in establishing labor supply offices throughout the country.

Cropsey farmer Arthur Huston (1902-1979) decided to help the war effort and grow peas in 1942. Because it was rather unusual to grow peas in Central Illinois and it was helping the war effort, the Pantagraph published a story about Mr. Huston's pea farming. A Pantagraph photographer took three black and white photos of the pea harvest on Arthur's farm.

When photographic negatives were used to print newspapers, the quality of the photo degraded when it was printed on newsprint. Then many years later, the paper newspapers were scanned and converted to microfilm. This step also degraded the quality of the original photograph. In the last decade or so, the Blade and Pantagraph microfilm was converted to digital files. The quality of any of the digital files of pictures printed today from these newspapers is inferior compared to the original photograph.

In 2020, the McLean County Museum of History announced a new project. In this new project, the museum will digitize old photographic negatives donated by the Pantagraph. The first batch of computerized old Pantagraph photos was released in 2020. This first batch included three black and white images of pea harvesting on the Arthur Huston farm in Cropsey.

Two of these pea harvesting black and white 1942 photographs were colorized using a free website. One of these two colorized images accompanies this article. As additional

old Pantagraph photos are converted to computer images, it will help us better appreciate other aspects of Fairbury's exciting history.

Cropsey farmer Arthur Huston harvesting peas in June of 1942.

colorize-it.com